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COMPOSITION AS A MEANS OF CULTIVATING LITERARY APPRECIATION

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It is my purpose in this article to set forth a method of teaching college courses in English composition, based on the assumption that the chief purpose of such courses is to make the student intelligently appreciative of his ordinary reading. Since only a small percentage of the students who pass through the colleges—so small in fact that it is almost negligible—ever write anything that can be classed as literature, and since the great majority are readers, cultivation of literary appreciation would seem to be a legitimate function of the college course. The method here presented does not, however, lay any less emphasis upon writing than if its sole intention were to make authors.

To one untaught in technique, the product of any representative art must stand or fall on content. The layman's admiration for artistic nonentities is notorious. Of course, among even ordinarily cultivated people, there is no such thing as absolute technical ignorance. Most people have some appreciation of pictures, books, and music which is not based on mere content. The question is of degree of ignorance. Literature is a representative art. The reader untaught in technique judges literature from the point of view of material. He likes a piece because the content pleases him. But in addition to the appreciation of content, there is an appreciation of technique which is capable of cultivation. I have noticed that many students need to be taught to appreciate Poe's stories. The reason is not far to seek. They do not like the kind of material that Poe uses. It would be singular if many of them should like the morbid horrors that he has conjured up. But interest them in the technique of story-writing, let them find out how stories are made, what devices are used to gain particular effects; then Poe becomes wonderful to them. They do not care for Poe's material more now than before, but

they appreciate Poe's stories; they have had opened up to them the wonders of Poe's structural genius.

What is true of stories is true of any literary field. It is possible by training students on the technical side to open up to them literary fields from which their standard of taste from the point of view of material would debar them. One can readily find an analogy. A woman who has attempted to sew has a keener appreciation of a well-made garment than one who has never had a needle in her hand. She may never care to make such a garment. She may have no use for it. She may think that the material in it is positively ugly. But she appreciates the fine sewing. The appreciation of the woman who is technically ignorant may be worth more in particular cases; she may appreciate the relation of the garment to life—not because of her technical ignorance, however, but in spite of it. Give to her, in addition to her superior endowments, the technical training of her sister, and her appreciation will be increased in a far higher ratio than the isolated value of the technical training would imply; for the dependence of material upon technique is so subtle that it is impossible to say how much an understanding of mere form adds to the appreciation of form and content combined.

If the purpose of composition is to cultivate literary appreciation, why write themes at all? Why not set the student to analyzing literary masterpieces, in order that he may increase his appreciation of them by discovering their technique? Literary analysis is a good thing; but, unfortunately, to begin with it is to begin the study of technique at the wrong end. It implies perfect familiarity with all the literary devices used by great writers, while as a matter of fact the undergraduate is familiar with few of them. He can no more be expected to appreciate a literary masterpiece by analyzing it than the woman who has never sewed can be expected to appreciate the work of the seamstress by ripping up the garment.

If I may be permitted to relate a chapter from my own experience, I should like to set forth a method of teaching composition which makes the subject absolutely dependent upon literature. I do not contend that it teaches anyone to write, though I believe that claim could as readily be made for it as for any of the methods

of which the intention is to teach expression. My sole contention is that it cultivates literary appreciation.

To begin, I make no attempt to connect textbooks on rhetoric with the students' written work. The scope of such books is too inclusive. They talk learnedly of force, elegance, exposition, description, and other terms which involve a knowledge of a wide literary field. I do not use them because I have too much respect for their intention; mine is infinitesimal in comparison. My idea of perfect felicity in teaching composition is to have a class to whom a textbook on rhetoric would be of value in writing; such a class would indeed appreciate widely.

The big literary principles being disposed of with the textbook, I proceed to discover some little ones, which, for convenience, we will call literary devices. (Anything that has ever been used effectively in literature is a literary device.) Then I ask the class to write a paper in which they make use of the same device. I do not select the subject. I do not limit the length. I do not ask for one of the so-called forms of discourse. I merely take care that the class understand the purpose of the device assigned. One illustration will clear up the whole method. Let us assume that the two selections quoted below are the basis of an assignment for a piece of written work.

After the most vehement tirade he would suddenly pause, throw his head back, and give as genuine and kindly a laugh as I ever heard from a human being. It was not the bitter laugh of the cynic, nor yet the big-bodied laugh of the burly joker; least of all was it the thin and rasping cackle of the dyspeptic satirist. But it was a broad, honest, human laugh, which, beginning in the brain, took into its action the whole heart and diaphragm, and instantly changed the worn face into something frank and even winning, giving to it an expression that would have won the confidence of any child. Nor did it convey the impression of an exceptional thing that had occurred for the first time that day, and might never happen again. It rather produced the effect of something habitual; of being the channel, well worn for years, by which the overflow of a strong nature was discharged. It cleared the air like thunder, and left the atmosphere sweet. It seemed to say to himself, if not to us, "Do not let us take this too seriously; it is my way of putting things. What refuge is there for a man who looks below the surface in a world like this, except to laugh now and then?" The laugh, in short, revealed the humorist; if I said the general humorist, wearing a mask of grimness, I should hardly go

too far for the impression it left. At any rate it shifted the ground, and transferred the whole matter to that realm of thought where men play with things. The instant Carlyle laughed, he seemed to take the counsel of his old friend Emerson, and to write upon the lintels of his doorway, "Whim."

When we speak of the restriction of immigration, at the present time, we have not in mind measures undertaken for the purpose of straining out from the vast throngs of foreigners arriving at our ports a few hundreds, or possibly thousands of persons, deaf, dumb, blind, idiotic, insane, pauper, or criminal, who might otherwise become a hopeless burden upon the country, perhaps even an active source of mischief. The propriety, and even the necessity of adopting such measures, is now conceded by men of all shades of opinion concerning the larger subject. There is even noticeable a rather severe public feeling regarding the admission of persons of any of the classes named above; perhaps, one might say, a certain resentment at the attempt of such persons to impose themselves upon us. We already have laws which cover a considerable part of this ground; and, so far as further legislation is needed, it will only be necessary for the proper executive department of the government to call the attention of Congress to the subject. There is a serious effort on the part of our immigration officers to enforce the regulations prescribed, though when it is said that more than five thousand persons have passed through the gates at Ellis Island, in New York Harbor, during the course of a single day, it will be seen that no very careful scrutiny is practicable.

It is true that in the past there has been gross and scandalous neglect of this matter on the part both of government and people, here in the United States. For nearly two generations, great numbers of persons utterly unable to earn their living, by reason of one or another form of physical or mental disability, and others who were, from widely different causes, unfit to be members of any decent community, were admitted to our ports without challenge or question. It is a matter of official record that in many cases these persons had been directly shipped to us by states or municipalities desiring to rid themselves of a burden and a nuisance; while it could reasonably be believed that the proportion of such instances was far greater than could be officially ascertained. But all this is of the past. The question of the restriction of immigration today does not deal with that phase of the subject. What is proposed is, not to keep out some hundreds, or possibly thousands of persons, against whom lie specific objections like those above indicated, but to exclude perhaps hundreds of thousands, the great majority of whom would be subject to no individual objections; who, on the contrary, might fairly be expected to earn their living here in this new country, at least up to the standard known to them at home, and probably much more. The question today is, not of preventing the wards of our almshouses, our insane asylums, and our jails from being stuffed to repletion by new arrivals from Europe; but of protecting the American rate of wages, the American standard of living, and the quality

of American citizenship from degradation through the tumultuous access of vast throngs of ignorant and brutalized peasantry from the countries of eastern and southern Europe.

The first selection is taken from *Carlyle's Laugh and Other Surprises* by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the second from *Discussions in Economics and Statistics* by Francis Amasa Walker. In this assignment I would discover with the class the purpose of the negative material. Why does Mr. Higginson in describing Carlyle's laugh tell what it was not? What purpose is served by "It was not the bitter laugh of the cynic, nor yet the big-bodied laugh of the burly joker; least of all was it the thin and rasping cackle of the dyspeptic satirist"? Why is the author not satisfied with telling that the laugh was "broad, honest, human," etc? Why does he say, "Nor did it convey the impression of an exceptional thing that had occurred for the first time that day, and might never happen again"? Why is he not content with "It rather produced the effect of something habitual," etc.? In the second illustration why does Mr. Walker explain at such length what he has not in mind when he speaks of immigration? After making sure that the class understood the purpose of the negative material, I would ask them to use the same device. When the papers were handed in, I would comment upon them from the point of view of effectiveness in the use of the device. Every student would know in advance from what point of view his theme would be judged.

The literary-device method, as well as any other, is, of course, dependent upon the teacher's judgment. The devices selected must be within the student's grasp. Literature abounds with devices suitable for papers of all kinds and of all lengths. The field is inexhaustible. The first paragraph of Irving's "Stage Coach," for example, involves a device easy to use and suited to a paper of seven or eight pages; the first chapter of Meredith's *The Egoist* introduces a device difficult to use and significant in a whole book.

My only reason for going to literature instead of to textbooks on rhetoric is that I find from experience that the devices set forth in textbooks—for description, elegance, and force are literary

devices—are too big for the student to grasp; and that the average Freshman enters college with a high degree of respect for language by rule, and a corresponding ignorance of the literature upon which all principles that are worthy of consideration are based. It is necessary that the student be given principles that he can grasp and equally necessary that he be able to see the foundation of such principles in literature. That principles governing discourse are based upon literary usage is little understood in practice in the colleges, though it is set forth in theory. Even faculties sometimes show their ignorance of it or contempt for it by handing over the courses in Freshmen composition to teachers whom they would not trust with a course in literature.

Two objections to the method of teaching composition outlined above are immediately evident. First, if the student is required to use other men's devices, he is prevented from originating any of his own; second, the method is scrappy, in that it makes no attempt to cover the field of composition; it contents itself with fragments. The first objection is theoretical, not practical. I have yet to find a student who has originated anything in technique. This is not surprising. Novices are not expected to become inventors. Whoever makes an invention in any field must first be familiar with the existing devices which are utilized for the purpose. A student has a chance of originating something in technique after he has made himself familiar with the devices already in use. He knows in what respects the old devices are not adapted to his purpose.

The charge of scrappiness cannot be combated; it must be admitted. But does the student get anything but scraps in the *laissez-faire* method of theme writing? He may have a text on rhetoric in which the principles governing all discourse are set forth, but that aids him little in actual writing. If he attempts to follow the principles, they are too general to be of much value to him. He proceeds without direction and has returned to him a corrected theme on which the criticism deals with a fragment of the field of literature. The question is whether it is better to set the student to work on a fragment selected with discrimination by the teacher, or to let him produce, undirected, a piece of work

which will be a fragment in any case, however fully his textbook may set forth the principles governing all discourses. Besides, to produce themes covering all the forms of discourse does not necessarily imply a wide range. As a matter of fact the devices employed by most students are limited, so that whatever the subject assigned the student runs through his repertoire. Some of the commonest literary devices are never employed by students. One has only to check up the devices used by a student in a series of themes to discover how narrow is his technical range.

I have set forth my own method of teaching composition, because it is founded on what seems to me the chief purpose of the college course in composition—the cultivation of literary appreciation. Appreciation of content in literature is determined by everything that enters into individual lives. The composition teacher cannot determine what kind of material the student will choose in his reading. He can put him in the way of judging his reading not only on content but on technique. He can widen his literary field, for he can cause the student to add to the literature which he likes for the content the literature which he likes for the technique.